

Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Marketing Strategies Used in Marketing the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) Products: A Case of the Midlands Campus

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Abstract:- The study sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the marketing strategies adopted by Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), Midlands campus in the marketing of its products. A mixed research design was used because of its flexibility and convenience, which allowed fusion of two different approaches that is, the quantitative and qualitative method to be used in one study. Because of its interactive nature, the qualitative approach allowed the researcher to draw as much information as possible from the participants. The quantitative approach on the other hand facilitated the presentation, analysis and interpretation of numerical data. Purposive sampling was used to select eighty (80) participants who were drawn from the freshers in the August 2019 intake. Despite many strategies used by the institution, the word of mouth proved to be dominant. Findings further revealed that some people were not aware of the existence of the institution. The study recommends vigorous marketing, that is, the university needs to work hard in order to enhance brand visibility. Study further recommends the need for the institution to evaluate its marketing strategies as well as investing in result oriented marketing strategies. Thus, focus should be directed more on outcome rather than process.

Key words: Marketing, Marketing Strategies, Zimbabwe Open University

I. INTRODUCTION

Many organizations have employed various strategies in trying to sell their products without necessarily evaluating their effectiveness. It has been observed that some organizations adopt these marketing strategies blindly and continue to use them without proper knowledge on whether the strategies work or not. The study intends to establish whether the marketing strategies employed by the Zimbabwe Open University, Midlands Campus were bearing fruits. The Zimbabwe Open University is a State University which offers Open and Distance Learning in Zimbabwe. The University has Regional Campuses dotted in every Province of Zimbabwe and the Midlands Regional Campus is one of the Campuses found in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe. The Midlands Regional Campus employs a number of strategies in marketing its programmes and these include; Road Shows, Careers' Days, Agricultural Shows, Newspapers, Word of Mouth, Signage, Radio, Television and

Social Media. Organisations should not put money on unsuccessful campaigns, hence this study becomes necessary in that it will establish those strategies that are more effective. As expounded by Schlegelmilch, (2017), marketing strategies help organisations to incorporate appropriate changes, and preparing the right approach. Thus, the study will help the institution to incorporate appropriate changes as well as preparing for the right marketing approach which is worth the investment, a view that is also supported by Brown et.al. (2007) who says optimum use of resources should be the goal of any organisation. Effective marketing therefore helps organisations reach their goals, the same view opined by Kotler and Armstrong, (2001), marketing enables firms to expand business from local to national or international level.

II. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The study was conducted in the Midlands Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University with the aim of establishing the most effective marketing strategies for student recruitment. Looking at the concept marketing the promotion aspect is critical in that it enhances business growth. As asserted by Solomon et. al (2009), promotion includes all the activities marketers undertake to inform consumers about their products and to encourage potential customers to buy these products and ZOU is doing a lot in as far as marketing is concerned. However, in doing so there is need for an organisation to adopt strategies that bring return on investment, which is what this study seeks to achieve. As postulated by Kotler and Armstrong (2010), marketing is the process by which an organisation relates creatively, productively and profitably. Thus, whatever strategy adopted, it must be productive and profitable, that is it must yield desired results. The same view is supported by Mabaso (2002) who propounds that a good knowledge of the market will assist the marketer to assess growth and profit opportunities available in the chosen market segments. What it means is, if you know your market, then you will be able to adopt the appropriate strategies.

Marketing is one aspect that any organisation, business, institution cannot afford to ignore as according to Brenkert

(2020), marketing ensures the survival of any organisation. Gross (2016), goes on to say, not only does marketing build brand awareness but it can also increase sales, grow businesses and engage customers more. Thus, any organisation that is serious about its operation has marketing at heart. Coming to educational institutions, Solis (2019) posits that universities indeed need marketing, whether it is to attract new students or motivate current ones. Thus, what ZOU is doing is commended. Kotler and Keller, (2005) views marketing as a well-planned process of carrying out the promotion, pricing and supply of goods, services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organisational goals. Thus, marketing requires proper planning in carrying out these promotions of goods and services. This study will therefore help the organisation in directing its focus on those strategies that work better as well as availing an opportunity to know how the strategies being used are faring. The study would help organisations direct their attention to those strategies bringing results. According to Eweh (2007), marketing is associated with high advertising and promotion costs, hence it becomes necessary to put investment on worthwhile strategies. The study will help the institution to direct its limited resources to efforts that produce the best return on investment, Kotler,(2008).

In the past, the aspect of marketing in educational institutions has never been an issue of concern as demand for university places was very high with students scrambling for limited places. It was very difficult to access university education, so marketing was not an issue. Also when Zimbabwe Open University was launched, it enjoyed the monopoly of it being the only Open and Distance Learning Institution in the country. However, the joy was short lived as conventional institutions also adopted the ODL model though under different terminology, for example, holiday block release and weekend block release classes. The development resulted in stiff competition amongst institutions. There was now a shift from the scramble for university places by students to the scramble now for students by institutions. New universities were also established in the country resulting in great need for marketing. Marketing therefore became essential. Competition has become the biggest enemy for educational institutions, a notion supported by Liu, (2020), who says neoliberal globalisation poses a significant challenge to universities around the world in this new millennium where higher education has now been restructured into a “quasi-market” which has resulted in institutions competing with each other. This therefore calls for the need to re-strategise if institutions are to survive in this competitive environment.

To quote the words of the famous American business magnate and founder of Ford Motor Company, Henry Ford, as cited by Sanchez (2019), ‘a man who stops marketing to save money is like a man who stops a clock to save time’. Thus, organisations that do not take marketing seriously and are immersed in their everyday duties and daily services taking the business as usual approach, are digging their own grave as

they may wake up to realize that there is no one to serve, all customers are gone. The same sentiments are shared by Kotler and Armstrong (2018), who allude to the fact that virtually, all institutions fight for chunks of market share and marketing happens to be the effective tool for the achievement of that goal of attracting customers.

An organization might have brilliant products on the shelf but if these are not communicated to the world no one will know about them, the same view is also shared by Baker, (2019) who says without marketing, one may have a product but have little chances of it getting any buyer. This only shows how important marketing is. It is one thing having good products on offer and quite another getting noticed or known. Randazzo (2013) posits that understanding management functions of planning, leading, organising and co-ordinating together with the marketing functions of price, place, product and promotion is essential and key to any successful organisation. Thus, marketing becomes the lifeblood of any business.

In this search or scramble for clients, there is therefore need for institutions to adopt suitable and effective strategies in the quest to build their brand. Many institutions make blunders picking on strategies that do not work best for them. This study will establish the most effective marketing strategies amongst those employed by ZOU, Midlands Regional Campus which include the following;

- Word of mouth (WOM)
- Agricultural Shows
- Careers’ Days
- Radio
- Newspapers
- Signage
- Television
- Social Media

Other strategies recommended for educational institutions

According to Solis, (2019) the following are amongst the best marketing strategies for universities;

- Social Media
- Focus on students
- Video Marketing on all platforms
- Statistics
- Embracing diversity

About the use of social media, Solis, (2019) asserts that, Prior to social media, teenagers depended on direct mail to learn about options after high school but with the introduction of social media and the internet, high schoolers have moved away from needing direct mail. The solution therefore is moving forward and reaching them through social media. A lot of students have embraced online facilities and it is important for educational institutions to follow suit. Thus, Solis (2019) goes on to say universities have no choice but to embrace social media? The need for change is also supported

by Bruce, (2019) who opines that, two decades ago, higher education marketing was remarkably different as recruitment campaigns had a one size fits all approach. Times have changed and today's colleges and universities must adopt a different marketing approach in order to compete favourably – one that is authentic and personalised. Although ZOU has embraced technology, the question remains, how effective are these.

The other strategy that Solis (2019) advocates for, is '**focus on the student**'. It is important to bear in mind that the business of marketing is an on-going process which does not end at the point of winning a customer. The process has to go on with the aim of ensuring that the customer gets the best service.

People must always remember that for an institution to survive there has to be a customer in place because without a customer the organisation will not survive. Hence, it is important to always treat students' right. Good customer relations is also viewed as a powerful marketing strategy. Any marketing programme must direct its focus on the client including prospective ones. This means institutions must be hospitable, giving the best to the client thereby making their experiences memorable. According to Emma Leech, as cited by Inge (2018), a key part of a successful university marketing campaign is *to listen to the students themselves*. The scholar goes on to say *"I see a lot of campaigns that have clearly been dreamed up by middle-aged hipsters in a studio, who don't actually understand students or people's emotions,"*

What this means is that people who make decisions about students are not on the ground and do not understand the plight of students. There is therefore need for marketers to collaborate with the students' in order to understand and appreciate their needs. Magort, (2019) stresses this point when she says, *'You may not realize it, but as a higher education marketer it might just be best to keep your lips sealed, instead you should let your happy current and former students do the talking'*. This is viewed as the best way to market the institution. What this means is a happy client is a great marketer and an asset to the organisation. It is also recommended as a good thing to partner with successful alumni to market their schools because when they get interviewed and get profiled, it gives a boost and credibility to the institution.

Building **personalised emails** is also viewed as a very effective marketing strategy by (Bruce, 2019) who says, say email marketing is often overlooked as just a way to send announcements and reminders yet it is quite effective because it can be personalised to suit client needs. The market should be segmented into different categories like prospective students, current, etc with their emails and an automated series can then be set up to automatically transmit the message to the intended audience (Bruce, 2019).

The **power of videos** is also emphasised by Solis (2016) who posits that in this digital age, it is effortless to watch a video instead of reading the synopsis. Many websites today are

inundated with narration of literature which is time consuming to read as compared to watching a video. For example, instead of giving a narration on the ZOU delivery mode, a video could just be played. Videos provide quick and easy to follow information; they are also captivating. Institutions must run responsive websites that are interesting and constantly updated. Bruce (2019) urges institutions to *build a great website experience*, where information is properly organised to such an extent that it does not turn off potential clients. Since ZOU has got a virtual campus, it has to invest in technology and build a great functional website. Bruce (2019) recommends that institutions conduct a website usability test with current and prospective students to get the actual people's experiences. Where improvements are required these will then be made. It is also important to ensure that the site is fast as there is nothing frustrating as the site that is slow and not user friendly. That will be a red flag to students seeking technology-focused institutions, particularly those studying under virtual campuses and techno savvy.

The aspect of **statistics**, is also viewed as a marketing strategy in that numbers can convince people that the institution is alive and worth attending. For example, the statistics of graduates over the years should be publicised on the website to attract new students.

Monthull (2016) also posits that when building marketing strategies, universities should take into consideration three (3) key questions, that is, what to communicate, to whom and how. That way, Universities will be able to deliver appropriate, consistent, clear and authentic messages to their prospective students. Blind marketing could result in funds being put to waste. This means, marketers must engage the target market with the accurate message, at the right time, using the right medium. A lot of homework must be done before marketing kicks off. Although the education sector is faced with a lot of challenges, Monthull (2016) says, marketing is the only way out, done right with proper planning and strategies, marketing can help universities boost their position in the market.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed research design because of its convenience, which allows combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches in one study. According to (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007:5) the combination of the two methods provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone. The approach therefore allows, collection, analysis and interpretation of qualitative and quantitative data in a single study. Because of this interactive nature, the qualitative approach allowed the researcher to draw as much information as possible from the participants. The quantitative approach on the other hand allowed for presentation, analysis and interpretation of numerical data.

Purposive sampling was used to target informants who were drawn only from the first year student of the August 2019 intake. The returning students were not subjects of interest. Although all the 512 students who registered for the August 2019 intake were subjects of interests, the researcher managed to interview eighty (80) students. Interviews were conducted on the day of orientation and as and when students visited the campus to process their registration. Telephone interviews were also conducted as contact details for the students were available. The task was manageable since the researcher as a member of the system had access to the data base. The researcher was mainly interested in finding out what had driven the students to join the Zimbabwe. So the question ‘how did you come to know about ZOU was asked to all the informants.. For example, was it through television, radio, newspapers, through a friend, social media etc. That was the objective of the study.

The response rate was high as the researcher had increased access to the subjects which made the whole process manageable.

The interview method allowed for rich data to be drawn through caption of detailed information about feelings, perceptions and opinions, a view that is also shared by Cohen & Manion, (2011). Some verbatim excerpts from the interviews were extracted as rich data, which was resented as given by the informants. Permission was sought and granted to record some of the interviews using the researcher’s mobile phone.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

5.2.1 Responses (N=80)

The following table outlines responses from the questionnaires.

	Marketing Strategy (What made you join ZOU)	Number	(%)
1	Word of Mouth (WOM)	50	63
2	Social Media	-	-
3	News papers	9	11
4	Signage	5	6
5	Agricultural Show	7	9
6	Careers Days	8	10
7	Radio	-	-
8	Television	1	1

The results indicate that the majority of students who enrolled for the August 2019 semester were a result of word of the mouth (WOM) marketing. Despite the fact that radio and television are amongst the most popular traditional marketing mediums, these were on the bottom of the list, with nothing for radio. There is need to conduct further research to establish why the situation is like that because radio is dubbed the medium of the people because of its wide reach.

When asked whether the informants were aware of other strategies that ZOU uses, one informant had this to say,

‘of course we know but some of these, especially social media -I personally do not trust social media because you cant rely on things that are posted there’

This shows some do have knowledge of other strategies ZOU uses. This particular case confirmed that they do not trust social media, hence it is good to adopt varied marketing strategies to cater for different interests. Some informants indicated that they were not aware of the marketing strategies ZOU uses as they go to know about ZOU from their colleagues, friends and relatives. This is true because the study revealed that the majority of students who joined ZOU were not aware of other marketing strategies ZOU uses. One gentleman actually posed a question, ‘why is ZOU not advertising its programmes like what other institutions are doing?’ He went on to say, ‘a lot of people out there do not even know about ZOU, just like me I only got to know about ZOU through a colleague.

The informants indicated that they were quite happy and comfortable getting information from people they know and trust, people they associate and identify with. When dealing with someone one trusts it is easy to get convinced or when talking to someone who has gone through it. This shows the power of the word of mouth strategy.

Word of Mouth (WOM)

Literally, word of mouth refers to information that is spread through the word of mouth. One responded had to say this;

As for me I’m a Gweru resident, but had no idea that such an institution exists; had it not been for my friend’s mum who studied and graduated with a Human Resources Degree with ZOU, I would not be here’. So I can say, I learnt about ZOU through a friend.

Another informant also said, my father studied with ZOU and he is the one who encouraged me join the institution, ‘I am also studying the same programme as my father, kkkkkkk’

Other respondents gave testimonies of their colleagues at work who got promoted to higher positions after attaining qualifications with ZOU. Some were reported to have landed very good jobs within and outside the country. For example, some were now lecturers at renowned institutions of higher learning. Very rich data was drawn from interviews as interviews allow follow ups, verifications, clarification of facts. There is also room to re-phrase sentences that may not be clear.

The study revealed that, the identity of a person, relations and trust are very important in influencing decisions. It is true that relations play a significant role in instilling confidence and trust during the communication process because where people know each other some element of trust is there. Thus, people are quick to accept information they get from trusted sources which could be the reason why some people do not trust social

media and other online platforms where the aspect of identity is usually anonymous and questionable.

However, it must be noted that though there are advantages associated with the word of mouth, there are also some limitations. Though (WOM) is cheap and very much trusted, it is very limited in terms of reach as compared to other mass communication tools like broadcasting media that can reach a wide heterogeneous audience. Any business is a game of numbers, the higher the numbers the more viable the business becomes. Organisations must therefore aim at attracting a larger clientele in-order to grow and survive in this economy. When looking at numbers, word of mouth may not be the best marketing approach. It is therefore necessary to also invest more in mass communication tools that have a wider reach.

The following sentiments drawn from one informant indicates that some people lack correct information about the institution, hence the need for extensive marketing.

I always knew about ZOU from way back but was just reluctant due to negative publicity that was associated with the institution. But I have watched many people graduating year in year out landing higher positions and getting good jobs. I have therefore realised that the institution is genuine and that time is not on my side, so here I am. The informant went on to say, the person who is my boss now, studied with ZOU'.

Negative publicity could be very damaging to the institution's reputation hence there is need for extensive marketing to put the organization in its correct standing. A lot of people out there may lack correct information and it is only through marketing that the misconceptions are cleared. Organisations need to speak out the true gospel about their products.

Another student said, *I knew ZOU and could have joined ZOU a long time ago but lacked adequate information.* These sentiments show that there could be many out there who lack adequate information about the institution and its products; hence, more marketing is needed.

Despite the challenges associated with the word of mouth strategy, it has proved to be very effective thereby confirming the power of the two-step flow communication theory propounded by Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld. The power of the two-step flow theory is also supported by Postelnicu (2017) who upholds the power of interaction by purporting that interpersonal interaction has a far stronger effect on shaping public opinion than mass media. Thus interactions among people who identify with each other usually produce positive results.

Signage

On the aspect of signage, the study revealed that ZOU lack informative signs as evidenced by the fact that even people who are residents of Gweru where the institution is housed were not aware of the existence of the institution. Some of the informants indicated that they had difficulties accessing the

Midlands Campus the first time they wanted to process their admissions. Signage is viewed as a very powerful marketing tool in that it can direct and attract clients to the organisation, be it motorists or foot traffic. This view is supported by Chris Joseph(n.d) who says, because a sign is visible 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, its effect is continuous, it does not stop. Thus, signs serve as silent sales persons for any organisation, hence ZOU must do something along these lines. This is what one respondent had to say about signage *'ZOU yacho haitombozivanwa kuti iripi muno muGweru macho, you ask people they do not even know kuti iripi' 'ZOU is not known even here in Gweru, you ask people and they do not even know where it is situated'.*

During the interviews some students said they had to rely on directions they got from colleagues, friends and relatives for them to get to ZOU as there are no directional signs leading to ZOU. One student confessed he accidentally bumped onto the ZOU signage that is mounted at the entrance as he was passing by the road and the other two said their relatives who happen to use that road told them about ZOU institutions. One informant had this to say,

'I was actually surprised to see a ZOU signage as I was driving along the road, I didn't know we had ZOU here in Gweru. I knew there was ZOU yes, but where its located, I did not know to be honest with you'.

What it means is that, if these students or their relatives had not used the road, they would not be part of the group, as they would not have known of the existence of ZOU. All these are Gweru residents. If Gweru residents do not know, when they are in the vicinity, what more those that reside outside Gweru, because the Midlands Campus caters for the whole of Midlands Region.

Another participant reported that he had seen a very big ZOU Bill Board at the National Centre in Harare along Samora Machael Road and that is where he learnt about ZOU and it had Campus dotted around Zimbabwe. This only shows the power of strategically posted signage. If the Midlands Campus had something like that in the CBD of Gweru, then quite a lot of people would know about ZOU, Midlands Region.

Unavailability of signage can be viewed as a de-service to an organisation yet signage is something that is not arduous to put up as compared to other strategies that are expensive to manage. Signage appears silent but very effective marketing. Lack of signage poses visibility challenges.

Newspaper

The nine participants who learnt about ZOU from the newspaper said they were surprised to learn of the very good programmes that ZOU was offering. One respondent said, *When I saw the advert in the Sunday Mail, I immediately got in touch with the Midlands Office and asked for directions as I had no idea of its location, and here I am, I am now a student with ZOU.* Newspapers are also a very powerful mass

communication tool as it has the capacity to reach a large heterogeneous audience. Asked whether they had not seen ZOU adverts in the newspapers, a number of students cited the issue of cost. Others, who had come from areas outside Gweru particularly rural, said newspapers were out of their reach in terms of geographical location. ZOU advertises its programmes in the Herald and Sunday Mail. The newspaper is one of the key marketing strategy that ZOU uses.

Radio and Television

On radio and television, some informants were surprised to learn that ZOU also uses radio and television as marketing tools. One informant said, 'Aaaaa, we have seen other universities on television but not ZOU'. The informant went on to ask, 'why don't you use television like what other institutions are doing?' Participants were advised that ZOU also use television particularly during the times of graduation. However, the fact that students were surprised that ZOU also uses television is an indicator that its presence there is not felt. It therefore becomes a problem when the market sees other institutions on television and not ZOU. 1% of the informants who had witnessed ZOU on television confirmed that it was during the time of graduation.

Social Media and Online platforms

Social media and on-line platforms encompasses computer mediated communication (CMCs) where communication takes place via computer and electronic systems like whatsapp, facebook, twitter and so on. Asked whether they were not aware of these platforms, some students responded, "hazvisi zveku trusta izvi zve social media"(these thing like social media cannot be trusted). People abuse social media so much to such an extent that some people are now finding it difficult to trust social media. An example is the following press statement released by the Zimbabwe National Army in the Sunday Mail of 18/02/18; entitled '**Army warning on false recruitment notices on social media**' where the army expressed great concern and displeasure over abuse of social media and other online platforms. The fact that anyone can post anything irrespective of legitimacy has resulted in social media losing credibility. A renowned communication scholar, Mquail (2010) has this to say about computer mediated communication (CMC);

Not all CMC features are beneficial as people are more exposed to unwanted communication from others, mainly the people they do not even know which reduces the personal character of the experience and the commonality achieved in cyberspace may be illusory.

Thus, CMCs cannot easily be trusted sources of information because most online communications are said to be subtle, representing people's attempts to portray themselves in the best possible light and with slight exaggerations (Zimbler & Feldman, 2011). However, it is a fact that things are changing and that people also have got to move with the times. For

example, the younger generations have become native to new communication technologies and these are the targets for most businesses. Organisations therefore have no choice but to embrace the new communication technologies. It is a good move that ZOU is on twitter, facebook, Instagram, myvista etc.

Though there are challenges associated with technology, the fact remains that technology has conquered the world and there is no going back. Thus, Peter Drucker as cited by Swaim (2009) highlights five (5) deadly business sins in which sin no. 5 is attempting to preserve yesterday ignoring tomorrow. Technology has come and institutions have to embrace it ensuring that social media is fully utilised and its usage evaluated time and again. Steinbock (2010) in his assertion supports this move when he says, *technology has contributed to the emergence of global market that people can exploit*. For example, with its Virtual Campus, ZOU has an international market and must therefore embrace and maximise use of social media to allow the institution to reach clientele scattered all over the world. Institutions can exploit world markets which are a good source of the much sought foreign currency in this ailing economy. Zimbabwean Education is highly rated worldwide, hence it is quite easy to sell the brand. Thus, embracing technology is the only way that can help university tap the foreign markets.

Agricultural Shows

This is an annual event that ZOU usually participates in. Although results revealed that only 10% of the students were a result of the Agricultural show efforts, it has to be noted that such Shows are a '*must not miss*' as sister institutions, government departments, Schools, Colleges, Industry and Commerce are part of such events. Failure to exhibit at such local events could be interpreted negatively by the publics. Hence, participation is a sign that the institution is alive and kicking. It is also part of community service which institutions must participate in.

School Careers' Days

Career days are a common feature on the University Calendar. The findings indicate that the efforts were not in vain as 11 % of the students were a result of Career Days Events. At School Career Days institutions do not only target school children but also other staff, that include teachers. Again other organisations with their staff will also be exhibiting. So career days do present good marketing opportunities.

V. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two Step Flow Theory

The two-step flow theory suggests that communication from mass media to the audiences involves two steps, that is, it moves from the media to certain individuals and from these people to other publics. According to this theory, people are not directly influenced by mass media but by other people who are called opinion leaders (OL). As posited by

Postelnicu (2017), the two step flow theory purports that interpersonal interaction has a far stronger effect on shaping public opinion than mass media. This shows that the theory is a very effective marketing strategy as people are easily convinced to believe information that comes from the people they trust, know and identify with. The fact that the majority of students who registered with ZOU during the August 2019 Semester were a result of the word of mouth strategy from their relations indicates that that the marketing strategy is very effective. According to the two step flow theory, the people who disseminate information to the people are the ones regarded as opinion leaders whom we can safely classify as the marketers in this context. Weimann (1991) used the term 'influentials' to refer to those people with the power to convince or influence other people. Such people with the power or ability to convince other people are very important within an organisation.

To confirm the power of the two step flow theory, Postelnicu (2017) goes on to say, factors such as interpersonal communication with family members, friends, and members of one's social and professional circles proved to be more effective than media exposure. This supports the view that relations are very powerful in convincing people because, it is easy to accept information from a trusted source as compared to information that comes from an unknown and untrusted source. Doyle, (2008) propounds that before consumers purchase a product, they have to engage in four processes, which are, being made aware of the existence of the product, comprehend the benefits of the product, which results in them being convinced that the product will meet their wants, which will then result in a positive purchase decision. This only supports the power of interpersonal communication where members get an opportunity to have all their questions answered in as far the product is concerned. This could be the reason why, the (WOM) has survived as a marketing strategy in this age of varied modern marketing strategies. However, lest not forget these words by Monthull (2016) who says, marketing strategies have changed a lot throughout the last years such that if we look back, for example, in the past thirty years, universities were recruiting students based on their reputation and word of mouth but today that is not enough. The world is now moving too fast, the changes that are occurring in different fields, including the higher education global market, force universities to change their tactics, marketing plans, strategies, directions, improve education conditions, implement innovations, hire the best teacher and implementing efficient and state of the art technologies.

Looking at the above assertion, it is therefore wise for institutions to also move with the times as the world is not static. Thus, the Minister of Higher and Tertiary Education, Prof. A. Murwira is spearheading a new Education Template, 5.0 which is a move away from the old template 3.0 that was basically theoretical. This shows that times do change so as the way of doing things. Thus, though the word of mouth

appears to be working, it is not enough in this age of technology. More needs to be done in as far and modern means are concerned although without discarding the word of mouth.

VI. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The findings from the study indicate that, out of all the marketing strategies adopted by the institution, the major client puller was the word of mouth (WOM) strategy. Thus;

- Word of mouth proved to be a very effective marketing tool.
- Study also revealed that there was scant information on the institution as well as some bad publicity as reported by some students.
- The university lacks signage to show its existence in the Midlands Province.
- Use of other marketing strategies, which include social media platforms, television and radio were not popular.

Although the university employs a number of strategies, these did not bring the desired results.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above findings, the study drew the following recommendations:

- Instead of relying on word of mouth, Zimbabwe Open University should also advertise their programmes in the local media such as local newspapers and local radio stations on a more regular basis, rather than wait for important occasions such as graduation ceremonies.
- The university should improve on its reputation by ensuring that their customers are satisfied, for example attending to their students expeditiously. This will have a positive projection on the image of the university. People always want to associate with institutions with a good reputation.
- The university should have signage that helps prospective students and members of the public to locate it. This will enable them to obtain information they require from the university without challenges.
- It is pertinent for the university to make its presence felt by adopting new and innovative marketing strategies that attract students to the university. These include the new and trendy digital technologies such as face book, twitter and Instagram
- The university should continue to utilize its traditional hunting grounds such as the Gweru Show and Schools Career Days. It should attend such fora as they provide an ample opportunity to market themselves. Thus, vigorous marketing is a must.
- The institution must always monitor and evaluate its marketing activities.

Further research could be conducted to establish why other strategies that have stood the test of time were not yielding desired results.

Inge, (2018) alludes to the fact that marketing can be a tricky business, but when universities get it right, the impact can be huge. There is therefore need for the Midlands Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University to keep on going until it gets it right.

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